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ABSTRACT

The notion of a functional syllabus has received widespread attention in recent years, so much so that in many cases it is being used where it is not suitable. One question is to what extent the functional syllabus may provide a framework for learning language structure, as it is difficult to impose any kind of structural organization on a functional syllabus. Where this is important, as in beginner courses, a functional design might better be avoided. A grammatical approach at the elementary level, followed by a functional approach at an advanced level, may be the best solution. A recommended approach is one that proposes gradual, small-scale development of functional materials to be integrated as part of already-existing programs. One example of how a functional component may be so integrated can be found in the third- and fourth-year program of Croatian secondary schools, where a specialized program is in use, but a common-core syllabus represents areas of common needs irrespective of specialization. A functional component integrated in the common-core syllabus could use theme-specific materials of the source texts as a starting point for a wide range of topics, and could be expected to help develop communication ability in everyday conversational interactions.
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THE PRODUCTION OF FUNCTIONAL MATERIALS AND THEIR INTEGRATION WITHIN EXISTING LANGUAGE-TEACHING PROGRAMMES (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SECONDARY SCHOOL SYLLABUS OF CROATIA, YUGOSLAVIA¹ - Keith Johnson, Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Reading

THE FIRST part of this paper contains observations concerning the suitability of functional syllabuses as a basis for general course design. Part 2 considers specific suggestions for the integration of functional materials within the existing secondary school programme of Croatia, Yugoslavia.

PART 1

It is now over two years since proposals for notional/functional syllabus design were first made available in accessible form (Wilkins 1973). Since that time the ideas have received widespread attention, to the extent that today course designers, examining boards and others whose decisions are likely to affect language-teaching programmes in crucial ways are already considering adoption of such syllabus designs, while materials claiming to be notional or functional in orientation are beginning to appear. The idea has, in short, 'caught on'.

As with many ideas that achieve relatively sudden popularity in this way, there is the danger that more will be claimed for these syllabuses than was originally intended. The danger has not passed unremarked: Wilkins (1974) for example emphasises that though such syllabuses may provide satisfactory frameworks for certain types of course, their suitability for 'general courses' (eg long duration school courses designed to cater for a variety of often only vaguely specifiable language needs) is as yet in doubt.

As for the suggestion that in the present state of the art notional/functional syllabuses should replace grammatical ones for such courses, this is seen as being 'decidedly premature' (p.120).

The continuing flurry of interest suggests that such warnings may go unheeded. The danger grows that syllabuses at home and abroad, sometimes affecting the future language-teaching strategies of entire nations, may change all too prematurely; that (often as a consequence) notional and functional materials should appear on the market with a rapidity indicating that they can differ from previous structurally-based materials in only the most superficial of ways.

Given such a situation it seems appropriate to reiterate, and elaborate on, some previously given warnings. Underlying everything to be said is the assumption that there is indeed a place for functional materials in general course design, despite the considerable problems that production of these

1. Thanks to both Keith Morrow and David Wilkins (Centre for Applied Language Studies, University of Reading) for comments on a draft of this paper. Keith Morrow's influence is particularly pervasive in Part 1 since, while the views expressed are personal, they are derived from our communal experience gained writing the functionally orientated course 'Communicate: the English of Social Interaction'. This was initially produced for a specialised group of students but is at present being rewritten for a more general audience.

materials is likely to pose. By dwelling on areas of difficulty and unclear application, the intention is simply to strike a note of caution to syllabus designers and course-writers who may be contemplating adoption of a functional framework. Functional (rather than notional) syllabuses will be considered in relation to general (rather than specialised) course design

Functions, grammar and level

To recognise the desirability of a functional approach is not in any way to claim that structural knowledge of the language is unnecessary or unimportant. Grammatical competence is a part of communicative competence, and the language teacher is clearly committed to ensuring that his students are able to manipulate the language structurally (entailing 'grammatical knowledge') as well as use it appropriately (entailing 'functional knowledge'). Given such a commitment, it is relevant to ask to what extent the functional syllabus may provide a suitable framework for tackling the former task.

In a functional syllabus the items to be taught are grouped according to ways in which they may be used, to form units bearing such titles as 'Greetings', 'Making Requests', 'Invitations' etc. We may wish our unit on 'Making Requests' (for example) to introduce exponents such as 'Would you mind opening the window?' Though these sentences may function in a similar way, they are structurally quite dissimilar; and indeed it seems reasonable to expect sentences which form a homogenous functional grouping to be grammatically unlike (cf Widdowson 1971:38). The choice of a functional organisation therefore seems to imply a degree of structural 'disorganisation' to the extent that many structurally dissimilar sentences may be presented in the same unit, while important examples of sentences having the same structure will be scattered throughout the course.

Indeed, it is difficult to impose any kind of structural ordering (or grading) on a functional syllabus. It does not seem to be generally the case that the language used to expound one function is structurally any simpler or more complex than the language used to expound any other. The 'language of greeting' may be as simple or as complex as the 'language of inviting', for example. Hence it is (generally, and with some specific exceptions) impossible to ensure structural progression simply by ordering the units in a particular way. We may be tempted to impose an artificial structural grading (as at times doubtless cannot be avoided), ensuring that grammatically complex structures are made to follow structurally simpler ones by careful selection of the exponents to be introduced. But if the materials are to remain functionally accurate, the degree to which this may legitimately be done is clearly restricted; and anyway the resulting structural progression will in no way approach the carefully plotted grammatical grading found in a well-designed structural syllabus.

The course-writer who attempts to reconcile functional organisation with structural grading is thus constantly faced with problems of this type: he wishes to introduce the ('complex') structure 'Would you mind opening the window?' in the unit on 'Making Requests': indeed he feels that to omit such a common form of requesting from the unit would be to commit a functional travesty. Yet this unit occurs early in the course, before other units containing structurally related but 'simpler' sentences such as 'I would like to open the window' (with the 'would' form) and 'I'm opening the window' (with the -ing form). An alternative to functional travesty is to switch unit order; but this creates other equally serious structural anomalies, since every unit introduces a number of exponents of varied structural complexity.

Structural practice within a functional design is of course possible. After the introduction of 'I haven't seen you for three weeks' in a unit on 'Greetings' for example, one strategy would involve the teacher interrupting the (functional) flow of the lesson to provide a grammatical explanation - a difficult and lengthy task, however, unless students are already familiar with present perfect and time constructions using 'for'. A structural drill may even be given, though if the functional organisation is to be maintained, one might argue that examples which are not associated with greeting (but which may nevertheless be grammatically crucial examples) will have to be excluded. Given that the sentence is but one of a number of structurally heterogeneous exponents introduced in the unit, the teacher will also be forced by time constraints into a selection of grammar points for detailed treatment which will almost certainly exclude many sentences deserving equally thorough consideration. Add to this the fact that the course design may provide little opportunity for follow-up work - the next example of present perfect + or may occur some ten units later - and it becomes clear that though grammatical practice may indeed be given within a functional framework, it is difficult to focus attention on structural concerns in a principled or comprehensive way.

Where such concerns are felt to be important, a functional design might better be avoided. High intermediate or advanced students, already familiar with much of the language's grammar, need not suffer from the lack of an organised and graded structural presentation - for such students it is a case of re-presentation, rather than initial introduction, of grammatical structures. They will most certainly benefit from the focus on language use afforded by a functional syllabus design, and this may enrich their previous language-learning by providing an important 'functional dimension' (Wilkins 1974:120).

It might be convincingly argued that at the elementary level a degree of attention should be paid to structural considerations that cannot easily be given within the framework of a functional syllabus. The future may clarify which of a number of possible strategies is suitable: a grammatical approach at the lower levels followed by a functional approach for more advanced students may indeed prove to be the optimal solution. The student would progress from learning how the language operates to learning how it is used, utilising grammatical and functional syllabuses respectively to focus on each task. On the other hand, time may provide evidence that the advantages of presenting language as a system of communication through a functional syllabus may, even at an elementary level, justify the unordered grammatical presentation (which, after all, a child acquiring its first language successfully learns to cope with). In this situation we might legitimately begin to speak of a 'functional method' on a par with audio-visual, audio-lingual and other methods. A third possible solution would indicate that a mixture of structural and functional approaches at the elementary level - with grammatically orientated (components of) units following functional (components of) units - might prove to be efficient.

These remain speculations, however, and where one is concerned not with experimental applied linguistics but with syllabus design affecting the future language-learning experience of large groups of students, there seems no responsible alternative to confining the use of functional syllabuses in general courses to the non-elementary levels. At the beginner stage teachers should be sceptical of 'abandoning the partly negotiable currency of the grammatical approach for the crock of gold at the end of the functional rainbow' (Wilkins 1974:120).

Producing functional materials

In the present state of the art the task of producing functional materials at a non-elementary level is not a simple one. Indeed, the appropriate question to ask is the extent to which their rapid and large-scale production (required as the inevitable consequence of any decision to adopt functional syllabuses for general courses taking place in the near future) is at present feasible. Some of the more serious problems, relating to different stages in the process of materials production, are outlined below.

1. Once the decision to adopt a functional approach has been made, a list of the functional headings to be covered has to be drawn up - no mean task if the categories are to be both well differentiated and suitable as a basis for the production of workable teaching units. A sentence such as 'Can you come with me to the cinema tonight?' may in the same context be said simultaneously to fall under a number of categories. At one level it is an exponent of 'suggesting a course of action'; at another it is an 'invitation'; at yet another it is an 'enquiry whether something is considered possible' (all categories in van Ek 1975). Clearly an enquiry of this latter type may stand as an invitation which, in turn, may form part of a suggestion as to a course of action. But the considerable risk of overlap is only one of the considerations involved here, and great thought needs to be given to the type of category suitable for teaching purposes - categories such as 'suggesting a course of action' may well subsume language so diverse and wide-ranging as to make clear pedagogic presentation difficult; while the language of 'enquiring whether something is considered possible' may be so restricted as to be an unsuitable basis for a teaching unit. Adoption of categories of this latter type may further prevent important functional generalisations from being made. Is it not an important communicative teaching point to convey that enquiries as to possibility may constitute invitations?

The course designer may expect to receive little guidance in this task from other sources. The field of functional syllabus construction is as yet relatively undeveloped, and such work as had been done is of restricted application. The Council of Europe's functional lists (one of which is intended to be merely exemplificatory - Wilkins 1973 - while the other is restricted to a specified level - van Ek 1975) are recognised as providing little more than guidelines (Wilkins 1973:173; van Ek 1975:ii). The work is moreover firmly rooted in a Western European context, and the applicability of such functional categories to other learning contexts has been brought into question (Widdowson 1973).

2. At the next stage a decision has to be made concerning which exponents to introduce under each category. This presupposes a knowledge of how the various functions are expounded - knowledge (for example) of how English speakers invite each other to dinner or ask each other favours. The native speaker will have to rely largely on intuition here, since already prepared lists are scarce - research into the pragmatics of language has simply not reached the degree of development whereby authoritative lists of exponent use may be produced. The non-native speaker, whose own language-learning experience has probably been structural and whose exposure to the language used as a system of communication may be severely limited, will find the task particularly daunting.

Given accurate knowledge of how each function may be expounded, selection from the total exponent lists must still be made. Most functions may be

expounded in a large variety of ways: Halliday's (1973:77) sixteen ways of scolding a child are clearly only a part of the total 'semantic network' available for that one function. In the absence of objective information on exponent distribution, it is difficult to see how a selection may be other than intuitive and arbitrary.

3. Alternative exponents of the same function, once chosen, will have to be clearly distinguished if adequate materials are to be produced and effective teaching take place. Problems for native and non-native speaker alike are at this stage particularly acute. To select a random example: two of the exponents (justifiably) introduced by van Ek (1975) for the function of 'warning' are 'Look out' and 'Be careful'. How are these used? Is it that 'Look out' implies an imminent danger, while 'Be careful' may warn of a danger in the (even distant) future? Is it true to say that 'Look out' is intended to elicit some physical avoiding action, whereas 'Be careful' simply alerts the organism to the possibility of danger? To what extent is 'Look out' reserved for dangers that are visually perceivable but which have not been noticed? Can the expression be used for an invisible yet nevertheless imminent danger? Does 'Look out' imply danger to the addressee himself rather than his endangering another person or object (as is perhaps (?) suggested by 'Mind out')?

In this particular case the reader may feel confident either that he can distinguish the expressions sufficiently well, or that their usage will not cause problems for a particular group of students (perhaps a unilingual class whose L1 has a similar distinction). But the point is one of frequency: the writer of functional materials aiming to teach the communicative 'value' of utterances (and the teacher using such materials) will constantly face problems of which this is but one random example. Linguistics may of course ultimately solve many problems, hopefully providing the course writer with revealing semantic generalisations. But in the present state of knowledge, the danger is that course designers will underestimate the extent of the task required to produce adequate functional materials.

4. There is more to writing functional materials than the simple presentation of selected exponents in functional groupings. Such presentation has the advantage of focussing on the language as a system of communication and needs to be consolidated by techniques practising the exponents in communicative type situations. What is required is a fresh consideration of the techniques already available together with the development of new exercise types. It seems likely that simulation and role play will prove fruitful techniques; but their use in language teaching is as yet relatively new, and it will be several years before the materials developer has stocked a sufficiently large and varied armoury of such techniques to make the large-scale production of adequate functional materials feasible.

The integration of functional materials within existing language teaching programmes

The difficulties of producing even advanced-level functional materials for general courses are therefore many. But what is the proper conclusion to be drawn? Educational planners should certainly (because of the difficulties and doubts involved) be wary of adopting functional syllabuses on a large scale, especially when (as is usually the case) decisions once taken cannot be easily reversed. It is also important to realise that the rapid production of adequate functional materials is not feasible at the present time. At the very most the gradual and small scale development of such materials is to be recommended.

Equally, 'going functional' - ie the exclusive adoption of a functional approach, involving the abandonment of familiar methods and techniques already found useful in the given learning situation - is unjustifiable from an applied linguistic as well as an educational planning point of view. To claim that any one approach (one syllabus type, one form of practice) may provide for all the multidimensional needs of a given non-specialist language-learning group entails unjustifiable theoretical rigidity. Indeed, it is entirely plausible that the most efficient means of providing coverage for specifications such as the Council of Europe's 'Threshold Level' (van Ek 1975 - expressed in terms of functions, settings, topics, notions and structures) is by means of a 'multidimensional syllabus' incorporating units of various orientations - functional, notional, structural etc. Certainly any general course-design based on such specifications will need to provide opportunities for practice of a non-functional nature, while the principles and aims underlying particular educational programmes will often demand the inclusion of non-functional materials.

The conclusion is decidedly not that there is no place for functional materials in existing programmes. There can be no doubt that, despite the considerable difficulties involved in their production, such materials can provide an important dimension to language-learning, and this is the implicit assumption behind all that has been said. Nor would one advocate a strategy which requires the complete elimination of uncertainties and problems before embarking on course production. Such a strategy would be unrealistic and the history of language teaching short had it been adopted in the past.

An approach which is both responsible and forward-looking proposes the gradual, small-scale development of functional materials, to be integrated as one part of already existing programmes. One specific proposal for integration is discussed in Part 2.

PART 2

Scope of discussion

The proposals discussed below relate to the third- and fourth-year English programmes in Croatian secondary schools. Under the curriculum reform mentioned in the preceding article, students follow a common programme of study during the first two years of secondary school and specialise in business, technical, scientific or other subjects during the last two years of the four-year course. Although the third- and fourth-year English programmes embrace a variety of specialisations in this way, it is possible to identify a number of commonly shared language needs, providing the basis for a common-core syllabus which all students, irrespective of specialisation, would be expected to cover during the two years.

One recognised objective of the programme is to provide a 'communicative dimension' to work done within the structurally based syllabus of the first two years. Indeed, a primary aim of the common core materials would be to develop the ability to communicate in everyday conversational interactions, and (as the following discussion makes clear) it is in this area that a functional component is felt to be of potential use.

The proposals submitted to the Croatian authorities are concerned with the general design of a programme to cover specialised as well as common-core needs. Many of the details in these proposals are of local interest only,

and discussion here is restricted to consideration of what form any common-core materials (intended to provide the kind of 'general course' discussed in Part 1) should take, and how a functional component might be integrated within them. What the functional component itself might look like (in terms of types of practice offered, techniques used etc) is not considered in detail here.

The existing framework and its suitability as a basis for producing common core materials

The standard of materials production in Croatia is high, and texts suitable for secondary school use are available from a number of sources. Recently the Education Department has favoured an approach using materials organised around what might be called 'theme areas'. Examples of such theme areas are: 'Red Indians', 'the generation gap', 'a holiday in London', 'a railway station' (the latter two constituting the 'Talking about Britain' series mentioned in the preceding article). Associated with each are sets of teaching materials including passages in prose, poems, dialogues, song texts etc, on clusters of topics related to the central theme area. These 'source texts' provide the stimulus for several weeks' language work utilising a variety of techniques, including project work, group-work, role-playing, discussions. The framework is generally a loose one - the topics, source texts and language work they stimulate being often related to the central theme areas only in indirect ways. Thus mention of a newspaper kiosk under the 'railway station' theme area may lead to the introduction of source-texts about the press followed by project work and discussions on the subject.

Structural practice, comprehension exercises, pronunciation-drilling and other forms of what will be referred to as 'language practice materials' are at present partly provided by ancillary books (such as O'Neill's 'Kernel Lessons Plus') and partly by exercises built into the theme area framework as follow-ups to the source-texts.

The theme-area approach has a number of advantages, especially given some of the specific objectives and principles of the Croatian Education Department. Part of its pedagogic attraction is that as a mode of presentation it has considerable 'face validity'. The students may easily relate the selected topics of their own interests, and whereas they might feel a functional or structural link between materials presented in the same unit to be somewhat contrived and 'abstract', they are likely to find the thematic link both natural and immediately perceivable. The approach also provides ample exposure to the language through the numerous source texts which, since they inevitably contain many points of linguistic interest, serve as an excellent point of departure for subsequent exercises. In this way the language to be practised is first introduced in rich communicative contexts rather than in isolated 'key sentences' or specially written dialogues.

The Education Department places great emphasis on the need to familiarise students with the life and culture of native-speaker communities. The theme area approach has provided an excellent vehicle for conveying cultural information, and the source-materials contain a wealth of sociolinguistic detail. At the practice stage, project work (which for a variety of reasons is a favoured technique) often involves the students themselves in exploring aspects of the native speakers' culture. In addition, the approach is both multimedia and multidisciplinary. The somewhat loose framework of the theme-area permits easy integration of materials on film, slides, tapes and records, while points of historical, geographical, sociological (etc) interest arise

out of the source-texts and are followed up in project work. In these respects the approach is in keeping with the general principles of the Education Department.

The major potential shortcoming of the approach lies in its suitability for developing proficiency at communication in conversational interactions. A theme-based approach making extensive use of project work runs the risk of overemphasising the 'language of reporting' (describing, narrating). It may encourage the students to talk - to describe railway stations, to narrate events from history, to report the findings of project work - but the practice tends (though the course-writers have attempted to counteract this tendency by the introduction of simulation exercises) to involve the construction of extended monologues on subjects of cultural relevance. The interactive skills necessary for conversational proficiency - the ability to respond quickly and appropriately (along ideational, interpersonal and textual parameters) to utterances whose content and form are not known in advance - involve elements not required for acts of reporting, describing, narrating, and a qualitatively different kind of practice is necessary.

But there is a 'quantitative' as well as a 'qualitative' point to be made. Reporting, describing and narrating account for a small part of everyday interactions, and if conversational ability is to be developed, a wider range of language functions must be dealt with - not just describing, reporting, narrating, but also greeting, inviting, apologising, etc. Similarly extensive coverage must be given in terms of settings and topics. As it stands, the approach is likely to provide relatively thorough coverage of a small number of these-areas. Materials on the theme-area of railway stations, for example, might produce in the students an impressive knowledge of (and expertise to handle situations concerned with) rail transport; the danger is that the framework which permits such thorough treatment of selected themes will fail to deal with a range of settings and topics sufficiently extensive to meet the students' language needs.

Proposed framework for common-core materials

Despite potential shortcomings, the existing framework remains pedagogically attractive, and the materials produced within it well serve a number of Education Department's aims. Rejection of framework and materials in favour of an exclusively functional approach, which might reach the single objective of providing a communicative dimension in a more efficient way, would clearly be ill advised. Equally clearly, however, a functional component integrated within the existing framework would ensure that due emphasis was given to communicative considerations.

Under such a scheme coverage of the common core might be provided by a series of teaching units, each containing theme-specific and language-practice materials (following the already established patterns described earlier) alongside materials with a functional orientation. Each unit would cover a separate theme area, and the theme-specific source-texts would serve as the point of departure for both language-practice and functional materials. To this extent the theme-area mode of presentation now used would be retained.

There seems no reason why a specific sequence for the presentation of the three material types within each unit need be fixed, though the fact that the source-texts are to provide the stimulus for language practice and functional materials will clearly impose some restrictions on the ordering. Nor should the material types necessarily appear as separate parts of the unit: it would

be possible (for example) to move from theme-specific materials to language practice, return to theme-specific followed by functional materials, ending up with more language practice.

The scope of the functional component and its relationship to other materials

A potential disadvantage of the 'multidimensional' framework, where materials of differing orientation are presented together in the same unit, is that the students will find themselves confused by the frequent shifts in focus. It is therefore pedagogically desirable that the heterogeneous materials should be seen to be linked together in some way. Choice of the 'theme-area mode of presentation' in which both functional and language-practice materials use the rich contexts of the theme-specific source texts as their starting point, provides such a link.

But what should the nature of the link be, and by what criteria should one decide to associate a particular function with a given theme area? Should 'making arrangements' be introduced in the 'railway station' or the 'holiday in London' theme-area, for example? Certainly the source-texts in both are likely to provide examples of arrangements being made, any of which might be used as a stimulus for functional practice. In fact, consideration of all the functions to be covered in relation to all the selected theme-areas is not likely to reveal persuasive arguments in favour of one set of associations rather than any other. No 'natural links' will suggest themselves, and to this extent the selection of which function to link with which theme is of little importance.

This does not mean that the process by which themes and functions come to be placed together in the same unit should be entirely unprincipled. There will certainly be valid criteria for sequencing the functions, and even perhaps the themes, in particular ways over the course as a whole. By treating the function of 'making arrangements' directly after the unit in which 'invitations' are covered, for example, one creates a sequence of 'invitation + making arrangements' which will provide the students with valuable practice in chaining functions introduced in separate units together to form extended interactions. Similarly, it may be decided to deal with 'means of transport' in a block of units, one of which is concerned with the railway station theme-area. In this way the 'railway station' theme and the 'making arrangements' function might fall together in the same unit; but the association in itself has no significance.

The reason why no 'natural links' between themes and functions suggest themselves is of course simply that functions are largely 'non-setting-specific': thus we may persuade (invite, make arrangements with) many kinds of people to do many sorts of things in many different situations, and indeed it must be seen as a primary aim of the functional component to practise each function in relation to the various settings and topics which the syllabus would specify. This is important not simply to provide a counterbalance to the relative restriction of settings and topics in the theme-specific materials, but also to indicate each function's full scope of application. It is therefore crucial that the theme area in which the function is initially introduced should not be the only setting in which the function is seen to operate. In addition, a relatively 'weak' link between function and theme is clearly desirable: to create too strong an association would be to make the essential task of generalising function out of initial context of presentation that much harder. Thus while the function of 'requesting information or services' (for example) might be introduced under the theme area of a 'railway station'

(perhaps through a dialogue in which a traveller requests the services of a porter) the students' attention would rapidly be directed to other sorts of requests, made in hotels, restaurants, school and business life - for rooms, meals, advice, secretarial assistance, etc. In this way the functional component uses the theme-specific materials as little more than a starting point, and ranges far beyond them into non-theme-specific settings and topics.

The motivations for linking functional (and language-practice) materials to the theme-specific source-texts are pedagogic: the latter provide excellent contexts for initial presentation, while the fact that the materials are linked together gives a coherence to the unit as a whole. But the course-writer has to strike a delicate balance between these pedagogic requirements and the necessity for the functional component to indicate the functions' scope of application over a wide range of settings and topics.

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